



Aug. 11, 1961: The pitch of helicopters

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8/6/2007 - **BOLLING AFB, D.C.** -- It was a wet Friday morning when Bolling's first helicopters arrived Aug. 11, 1961, the Vertol H-21's dual rotor disks coming to a halt, marking the successful transfer of the 1001st Helicopter Flight from Andrews Air Force Base, Md.

Helicopters had flown in and out of Bolling before this date, but this was the first time a helicopter unit had been assigned to the installation. In fact, shortly after their relocation, five additional helicopters were assigned to augment the flight. In 1961, Bolling was looking at future without an airfield. Washington National Airport and Bolling were competing for airspace in dangerous proximity. Helicopters were seen as an alternative since they could fly at lower altitudes and slower speeds, but were instrumental to developing plans within the Department of Defense.

Visionaries within the DOD created tactics and training techniques for rapid insertion and extraction of troops via helicopters, as well as to deliver firepower on enemy targets. Bolling's helicopter mission was a way for those planners to bring the helicopter into everyday use in a visible part of the country. Because the helicopters also allowed training for pilots and planners wanted to have as many pilots flight-ready for airmobile tactics and deployment, 100 percent manning was required at Bolling at all times, like other installations that also flew helicopters. Support personnel were added to the growing helicopter mission.

The decision to build up the helicopter flight took precedence over all other assignment actions at Bolling due to their unique mission; the H-21 "Workhorse" was adapted for the rescue of personnel and for assault operations under combat conditions, but was used in the National Capitol Region for transporting high-ranking personnel from site to site. The idea was to display the tactical advantage of the helicopter, not its novelty.

In the beginning, the H-21 was often pegged with the undignified moniker, the "Flying Banana" due to its unusual shape. A modified HU-21 made the first nonstop transcontinental helicopter flight Aug. 24, 1956. Inflatable pontoons on the side also allowed the helicopter to land and take off safely from water. It was the first heavy-lift helicopter, but could fly no faster than 132 miles per hour. Still, the helicopter was becoming seen more and more as offering unique strengths to military missions.

A spinning rotor disk couldn't match the performance potential of a jet engine, but the helicopter offered an alternative to transport passengers over short distances where runways weren't available. Within less than two years, the military helicopter would be fully realized as a stable platform for airmobile warfare, as demonstrated by the 11th Air Assault Division (no relation to 11th Wing), which would later be renamed the 1st Cavalry Division, 7th battalion (Airmobile), and earn fame for their actions at Ia Drang valley in 1965 Vietnam.

The Air Force helicopter mission eventually returned to Andrews AFB, but helicopters remain a common sight at Bolling today, a site for Marine One and other helicopters of the Marine Corps to conduct operations.